

*December 9, 2018*

*Luke 3:1-14: **“As You Prepare for Christmas,  
Think on These... “Preparation”***

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*“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God (Luke 3:4-6).’”*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The Advent and Christmas seasons are upon us! Stores have been selling Christmas merchandise for months. People are busy making all kinds of preparations. Trees to be decorated. Dinners to be cooked. Presents to be wrapped. Travel plans to be executed. So many preparations to be made. But, how many of us are spending as much time spiritually preparing for this time for our every day walk with the Lord and our future with him? It is easy to be consumed with so many traditions and obligations that Jesus ends us being secondary, or completely left out of the picture. And so, our theme for this 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Advent: **As You Prepare For Christmas, Think On These . . . Preparation! - Spiritual Preparation!**

The Scripture presents John the Baptist and his ministry as the fulfillment of the words of Isaiah. We too benefit as we hear as the voice in the wilderness crying, “Prepare the way of the Lord.” In ancient times, when most roads were often little more than animal and cart paths, it happened at times that, when a great and powerful ruler wanted to make a journey, companies of slaves were sent ahead of him to smooth out the road over which his chariot would carry him. Low spots and holes were filled in; bumps were removed; bends were straightened - all so that the great king might have a comfortable trip, in keeping with his position.

This picture will not be lost on us if we understand the obstacles and hindrances, the detours and distractions, that must not get in the way of the King of kings who comes to us. The Greek work for “prepare” in the Gospel text is in the present tense. I don’t expect you to really remember that. But, I point it out so that you may understand that it expresses continuing action. In other words, the message of Isaiah and that of John the Baptist to us this Advent and Christmas season is really best expressed as: “Keep on preparing the way of the Lord.” This emphasizes the fact that the message that we need to hear in 2018 is a message that is a past, present, and future message - it is ongoing.

When the crowds came out into the Judean wilderness to John the Baptist, he confronted them in pointed ways to smooth out, what we might call, “the spiritual road.” They were forced to deal with things in their lives that were obstructing - blocking the way of the Lord into their lives. For some, it was a greedy approach to life that took advantage of others for personal gain. Some soldiers were told, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.” Others were pointed to their lack of concern for the needy: “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.” Others approached John with pride in their ethnic and religious purity. The Baptist called them a “brood of vipers” and told them that they should not fool themselves by thinking that they had it made because they were blood relatives of Abraham, warning them that the ax of God’s judgment was ready to strike at the roots of their self-righteous, religious trees. What was needed for all was a sincere turnaround - a real recognition of sin and sorrow over it.

If John the Baptist were here, what do you think he would point out in your life? What is there, perhaps safely hidden from the view of those around you? What are the obstacles and hindrances, the detours and distractions that get in the way of the arrival of your King today, the next day, and the next? Again, preparation is ongoing in our lives. In a spiritual sense, low spots and holes are constantly to be filled in; bumps need to be removed; bends are to be straightened that the King of kings might be present in our lives now by faith, and that we might be continuously in a state of readiness to meet Jesus either in death or when the last trumpet sounds. Again, the theme is one of **Preparation! - Spiritual Preparation!**

John the Baptist's "Prepare the Way of the Lord" is to be understood as Advent and Christmas, the whole church year, today and everyday, the way by which the King of kings is presently here now and will be present in the future in that moment when we are in heaven. This preparing the way is a living in repentance that shapes and molds our todays and tomorrows and the final moment when we are with the Lord Jesus Christ in Glory.

So, have you ever tried to make the Lord's highway straight and smooth? Have you sincerely tried to deal with the things that obstruct the way of the Lord in your life? If so, you know as I know that the job is impossible for us. The ruts and potholes and bumps of our shortcomings and failures just don't disappear as we might like them to. God must do this, and he does it through the preaching of his word. The voice in the wilderness came preaching - preaching "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins," as it says in our lesson. This voice must never cease as long as we are in this sinful world.

There is a Chinese proverb that says: "To forgive the unrepentant is like drawing pictures on water." In this life, our preaching continues to be a preaching of "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Anything less is drawing pictures on water. Jesus crucified is meaningless if we do not recognize and acknowledge our sin. In this preaching, God not only calls us to a repentance in our lives, but he enables that turnaround through law and gospel. Sin is made utterly sinful and sorrow results. Tears are wiped away by when sins are washed away and we are forgiven. As long as we live in this sinful world and find that there is a part of us that is sinful, this powerful work of dying to sin and rising in Christ is a daily reality for the child of God. We need to hear the message of John the Baptist loud and clear as we live each day, and as we prepare for our departure from this world.

When Jesus came to the Jordan, John the Baptist pointed to him as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." The good news is that is that the Baptist's call to make the Lord's way straight and smooth is not merely a demand or duty, but it is fully the action of God in our lives who calls and effects a repentance - a straightening and smoothing out the way in our lives that recalls the words of our lesson: ". . .and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." What God calls for, he also enables through the gift of his Son and through the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Scripture and Sacraments. One Lutheran author writes:

I guess we would say that the Holy Spirit is the Commission of Highways in Heaven's Highway Department. He brings the Advent voice into the wilderness of our secular, humanistic world, into the desert of materialistic preparation for Christmas, into the "Jordan

depression” of our own too frequent spiritual apathy and unconcern, and His call is that we repent and turn in faith to Jesus Christ so that Heaven’s Highway Department will construct a smooth accessible roadway between God and us.

And so, we rejoice to hear the Advent voice crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord.” It’s a serious call, for each of us knows just how desperately our road needs rebuilding. But, it is also a glorious call, because it assures us that through the life and death and rising of Jesus, and through the Holy Spirit working in the Word and Sacraments, Heaven’s Department of Highways is on the job.

So, are you prepared? Are you spiritually prepared? Christmas is just a few weeks away, but we are preparing for much more than that. Our preparation is everyday with our future departure in mind. May the days and months and years always be a preparation for Christ: confessing sins, meditating on his Word, receiving the Sacrament, singing of his words and works. Advent is a constant reminder of our daily need to be prepared for the coming of the King of kings - God’s one and only Son in power, glory, and judgment.

May God grant that we be prepared, watchful, and ready like the five wise virgins in Matthew 25. Ten virgins are waiting with lamps to meet the bridegroom. Soon he’ll be passing by in a joyful wedding procession that they hope to join. Five of the virgins are foolish and unprepared. Five are wise and prepared. The foolish and unprepared bring their lamps but no oil. The wise virgins are prepared and bring both lamps and oil. The bridegroom’s procession is delayed. The virgins get sleepy and doze off. Finally, the cry comes at midnight: “Here is the bridegroom! Come out and meet it.” So, are you prepared?

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott